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How Race is Made in America; Immigratioin, Citizenship, & the Historical Power of Racial Scripts by Natalia Molina

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Molina, Natalia. *How Race is Made in America; Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. xv + 208 pages. Paper, $27.95.

Historian Natalia Molina's previous work, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (2006), was a monograph that paid close attention to the issues of public health and treatment of immigrants in Los Angeles, especially Japanese, Chinese, and Mexicans. That study, while carefully (even narrowly) focused on issues of public health and public policy, noted that the concurrent majorities of voting powers, dominated then by relatively wealthy white bourgeoisie, discriminated against all ethnic immigrants but was less oppressive—even occasionally relatively "tolerant"—of Mexicans in particular and Latinos in general. Despite her precise focus on health in a bygone era, the heated debates about immigration in recent years brought her monograph and her ongoing scholarship into much broader concerns about public policy and race relations, with special emphasis on race relations in all societal contexts, especially the processes by which Californians define race—and how they "write scripts" for such descriptions. That more public and controversial set of concerns eventuates in this study, *How Race is Made in America*, which attempts no less than a description of how power elites interact with working-class blacks and whites and with immigrants to define race for each kind of people in the ethnic polyglot that is our largest and wealthiest state. Her study would be important simply because of California's size and influence, but it is even more important since all of the U.S., most especially the Deep South (once so completely a two-color "script") is trending toward California, that is, rapidly becoming truly multicultural (a point made well in 2014 by Tracy Thompson in *The New Mind of the South*).

Molina's study emphasizes the "salad bowl' of many diverse ethnic identities (most of which retain clearly distinct features) rather than the once fashionable "melting pot" in which assimilation eliminates the differences in such distinctions in favor of a California/American identity that subsumes Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and any other specific Asian or Latin American identities. Instead, she uses the much more politically charged word *race*—a political rather than a biological construct—to examine how the complexities of debate and action in LA produce definitions for Asians and for Latinos. And those definitions do acknowledge some agency, being in large part creations of a self-identifying minority. Nor are those definitions, even if imposed by white and other ethnic groups, purely negative. But they are finally political creations—and the "scripts" are very limiting, that is, ethnically and racially discriminatory.

Central to her study of such racial projects (a construct of identity imposed from the outside) is a relational approach looking at Mexican Americans in dynamic interaction with Japanese and Chinese as well as with whites of differing ethnicities. Molina says that some elite owners of capital wealth in the US need racial projects that set black, white, yellow, brown, red, and religious/ethnic groups against each other, so that ethnic consciousness gets in the way of class consciousness. The resulting inter-ethnic rivalries and fighting thus stymies any broadly based class consciousness that might emerge in a unified labor movement, and obviously prevents the full fledged development of a European-style labor party.

Until the 1920s, Mexicans in the U.S. were considered "white" and were not considered much of a threat to anyone, especially since most were *braceros* (manual laborers) who did not live the entire season in the U.S., largely kept to themselves, and moved frequently in pursuit of temporary jobs with the crops according to seasons. There was a legal (and U.S. Census) recognition of Mexicans as "white," despite the dark hue of some *braceros* and despite the very

light hue of many African Americans, Chinese, and Japanese. By the 1930s, things had changed: Many Mexicans were staying longer and attempting jobs in fields other than seasonal farming. They were becoming educated, generally improving their material lot, and expressing desires to stay and flourish, as had Jews and Irish and other ethnic groups increasingly recognized as "white" and fully American. Consequently, from 1938 to 1965 Mexicans were "redefined" as brown and "not white"—and those processes evolved in relationship with Japanese and Chinese being redefined as hard working, unthreatening, assimilable "knowledge workers" necessary to a new economy. For Molina, the relational study of racial projects shows that "capitalism's need for an exploitable work force" led to changes in ethnic identities and the resulting rivalries to prevent a class-conscious political movement (p. 10).

That may paint capitalism itself as too anthropomorphic and too monolithic, but it is certainly the case that power elites who control wealth in finance capital benefit from lack of cohesion in the ranks of workers. Thereafter ensued new racial scripts that developed new racial stereotypes about laziness, irresponsible sexuality, drug abuse, and over-reliance on government welfare. She certainly makes her case that race is something "made up" rather than naturally occurring, and that political elites benefit from the racial scripts, as all working-class folk suffer under the ethnic prejudices that prevent unified and coherent political action for redress.

In light of recent hysteria about Mexican immigrants, it is helpful to see that the hysteria does have a history with a beginning, a developmental growth, and surely an end as well. Left unexplained is Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (1944) in which the black folk, "indelible immigrants" in Daniel Boorstin's apt but cruel phrase, persist as unassimilable, and persist as objects of a hysteria even more remarkable than what is aimed at Mexicans. She faces this relational dynamism that keeps blacks and Mexicans apart, but cannot explain where it really comes from or where it is going. But that is perhaps something for still another book.

How Race is Made in America significantly advances our understanding of some forces that desperately need understanding as the U.S. becomes majority/minority with white ethnic groups moving into a minority position and with Mexican and other brown ethnic groups becoming the single largest minority in shifting coalitions of structures that are no longer multicultural in classroom lectures but rather multicultural in fact. This book needs to be on professors' shelves, on reading lists, in our libraries, and above all in the hands of our students.

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